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STATE FOR NEA/MAG - HARRIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: WOMENS' "NGO": LESS HIJAB, MORE BEN ALI

REF: TUNIS 2565 (NOTAL)

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES a.i. DAVID BALLARD FOR REASONS 1.4 (b)
AND (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. A recent meeting of a major pro-GOT Tunisian women's NGO to discuss Tunisian values turned into a rally in support of Ben Ali and his policies. While ostensibly a meeting in support of secular and moderate values, the October 27 event organized by the National Union of the Tunisian Woman (UNFT) was designed to support Ben Ali's stance against the wearing of the hijab. The ugly side of Tunisian politics was revealed when senior UNFT officials, including the president, demanded that all women in attendance remove their veils. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On October 27, PolOff attended the National Union of Tunisian Woman's (UNFT) "big meeting" on "The Tunisian Woman's Lasting Adherence to the Values of Moderation, Openness and Diligence." Over 500 members and supporters, who had been bussed in from every governorate in Tunisia, attended the event at a hotel in a suburb of Tunis. While theoretically a private women's NGO, the UNFT is known for its strong support of the GOT, and the event turned out to be more of a political rally than a lecture. The UNFT hung red and purple banners (the color of the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party) in the streets around the hotel supporting GOT's criticism of the hijab (reftel). Signs proclaiming "No to backwardness! Yes to moderation!" and "Yes to challenging every attempt to divide" were hung around the meeting room. Organizers distributed picket signs with similar slogans for attendees to display and called out instructions for how to arrange them for the best visual effect. At one point, a woman stood at the podium to coach attendees on the verses of the event-specific songs, such as "The Personal Status Code is against all reactionary political movements."

¶3. (SBU) Perhaps not realizing that the hijab was the target of the event, approximately five percent of attendees were veiled in everything from modern scarfs to traditional kerchiefs. As they arrived, a female member of the UNFT board of directors and an unidentified man circulated the crowd to confront these women. Utilizing techniques from whispering in their ears to tugging at veils and verbally abusing the women, the two individuals managed to convince several women to remove their veils. Pulling the kerchief off a rural woman off, the man proclaimed, "Look how pretty you are!" while the woman lamented "I'm naked!"

¶4. (SBU) With each successful unveiling, it seemed another veiled woman arrived. Thus, when UNFT President Aziza Hatira arrived, she proceeded straight to the podium and began to berate veiled members of the audience. "No Tunisian or Egyptian or English veils!" said Hatira, as she pointed to

individual women and called on them to remove their veils. Going beyond the GOT's usual arguments that the modern veil is an import that is foreign to Tunisian values, Hatiri said that even the traditional Tunisian sefsari (an ivory-colored fabric that is wrapped around the head and body) was to be removed. In a demonstration of Tunisians' unwillingness to disobey instructions, all of the offending women ultimately removed their veils.

¶ 15. (SBU) Once the veils were removed, signs distributed and chants practiced, Hatira began her speech, which focused on the advancements Tunisian woman have achieved thanks to the Personal Status Code. The code, enacted by former president Habib Bourguiba in 1956, granted Tunisian women unique rights in the Arab world, including the right to divorce and the banning of polygamy. Hatira also predictably praised the gains women have realized thanks to President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. On several occasions, the crowd spontaneously erupted in cheers for Ben Ali, leading a woman sitting next to PolOff to note, "See how his real supporters stand up and applaud while those who aren't such great supporters only clap politely?"

¶ 16. (C) COMMENT: Like other quasi-NGO cheerleaders, the UNFT was keen to demonstrate to the GOT its loyalty to official policies. Perhaps in response to a recent RCD meeting with NGOs on combatting the spread of the hijab (reftel), Hatira's speech was a predictable summary of the GOT's arguments against the veil. However, the event was unusual in that veiled women attended the event without realizing they were the target of the discussion. While some appeared to have been rounded up and bussed in to attend an event about which they knew little, others clearly appeared to be active members who chose to veil. The aggressive way the UNFT leadership chose to denounce seemingly pro-GOT veiled attendees further demonstrates the GOT's confused approach about the topic. END COMMENT.

BALLARD